

# Wings over Alaska

SUMMER 2004

BIRDING NEWSLETTER

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### 1:10,000 or less

Britain has a dense human population, developed landscape, and lots of birders. It has been estimated that 1 in 3 rare birds visiting Britain are found, said Nova Scotia birder Blake Maybank.

Nova Scotia has about 5000 miles of coastline, hundreds of migrant traps, about a million resident people, and 40 active birders. Maybank estimates that

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## A Dickcissel and a Visiting Birder

by Karla Hart

What are the odds? In 1991 Blake Maybank was passing through Haines for one night. While taking a walk before breakfast, he saw a house finch at a feeder, the first record for Alaska. Unfortunately, he didn't have his camera with him to document the sighting so his record was not accepted by the Alaska listing committee.

Jump forward 13 years. Maybank has one morning in Juneau in May to bird before beginning a stint as a shipboard naturalist. He heads out to the Mendenhall Wetlands State Game Refuge, Juneau's most popular birding location, to reacquaint himself with Inside Passage land birds and their songs. The third bird he saw that day, a dickcissel, is a fairly common sight in his home province of Nova Scotia in the fall and winter, though in non-breeding plumage. In Alaska it is entirely outside of its known range.

This time Maybank had his digital camera at hand and got images that proved he had something special: a male dickcissel in bright yellow breeding plumage - another first for Alaska.

A Juneau Audubon bird walk elsewhere drew many of Juneau's most avid birders away from the refuge that Sat-



© Deanna Mac Phail

Juneau birder and photographer Deanna Mac Phail relocated the singing dickcissel early the morning after initial discovery.

urday morning. Fortunately, naturalist Laurie Craig, also the *Wings Over Alaska* artist, was walking by and knew whom to call and how to get the word out to the Juneau birding community. Birder Deanna Mac Phail captured the great image above the next morning.

Maybank attributed his unusual sighting on Juneau's most popular trail for birders to a number of factors. He happened to be there a morning that most regular birders weren't and the dickcissel was. Because the Mendenhall Wetlands is a popular place to view shorebirds in the spring, many locals probably head right out without birding at the trailhead. And, in Illinois a week before, he had seen a dickcissel in breeding plumage for the first time so his eye was tuned.

## Exploring Alaska with Birds

A developing interest in birding gives me the perfect motivation for exploring more of Alaska and a purpose for visiting communities as more than "just" a tourist.

Birds called me to Nome last summer, but the lure of seeing muskoxen had me hiking atop a hill at midnight. Birds called me to Yakutat this spring; the galloping grizzly, boat ride through the surf, and flight over the Copper River Delta were bonuses.

Already I am dreaming of where to go next summer. The Pribilofs? The Colville River? Or the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta? Alaska offers richness in species diversity, sheer numbers, and chances for discoveries and adventures. Birding is a modern catalyst for exploration.

Happy birding, Karla



*Wings Over Alaska* is a Watchable Wildlife program of the Division of Wildlife Conservation, Alaska Department of Fish and Game.



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# Letters to Wings Over Alaska

## Bird Feeders not Bear Feeders

I checked out the newsletter and really enjoyed the articles. As a bear biologist, it also reminded me that this is the season when birders need to put up their feeders to reduce attractants for bears. The newsletter might be a good way to remind folks that bears quickly learn to seek out bird feeders, and this brings them into contact with humans, unsecured pet food, garbage, etc. Since the birder community is about as environmentally aware as you can get, they probably would appreciate a reminder like this.

Sincerely, Dick Shideler  
ADF&G Fairbanks

*Reminder well taken. Except for hummingbird feeders (which bears generally seem to leave alone), in Alaska feeders should be reserved for the winter when natural foods are more scarce and bears are denning up.*

## Readers from Afar

Thanks.....I do appreciate the contact. As a member of the American Birding Association Board of Directors I'm always trying to get a feel as to what is going on in a number of key places re: Birding. Alaska is clearly one of my favorites and I will be returning again this September. Therefore, it is good to see this newsletter in place as an aid to the birding community.

Good work. Fr. Tom Pincelli  
Texas

## Birding Trip Reports

Do you like to read and share birding trip reports? *Birding the Americas* offers a compilation of reports, including from Alaska. Creator Blake Maybank reports this project was a web site learning exercise that he updates a few times a year. Check out: <http://maybank.tripod.com/USA/AK/AK-Index.htm>



Western Sandpipers, Yakutat © ADF&G/Karla Hart

# North American Breeding Bird Survey

By Patuxent Wildlife Research Center

The North American Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) is a long-term, large-scale, international avian monitoring program initiated in 1966 to track the status and trends of North American bird populations. The U.S. Geological Survey Patuxent Wildlife Research Center and the Canadian Wildlife Service jointly coordinate the BBS program.

In the mid-twentieth century, the success of DDT as a pesticide ushered in a new era of synthetic chemical pest control. As pesticide use grew, concerns, as epitomized by Rachel Carson in *Silent Spring*, regarding their effects on wildlife began to surface. Local studies had attributed some bird kills to pesticides, but it was unclear how, or if, bird populations were being affected at regional or national levels. Responding to this concern, Chandler Robbins and colleagues at the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center developed the North American Breeding Bird Survey to monitor bird populations over large geographic areas.

Although most concerns over pesticide use in North America have subsided in recent decades, bird populations continue to be subjected to numerous widespread threats including habitat loss, habitat fragmentation, land-use changes, and other chemical contaminants. Today, the BBS continues to monitor bird populations across North America and informs researchers and wildlife managers of significant changes in bird population levels. If

significant declines are detected, their causes can then be identified and appropriate actions taken to reverse them before populations reach critically low levels.

Each year during the height of the avian breeding season, June for most of the U.S. and Canada, participants skilled in avian identification collect bird population data along roadside survey routes. Each survey route is 24.5 miles long with stops at 1/2-mile intervals. At each stop, a 3-minute point count is conducted. During the count, every bird seen within a 1/4-mile radius or heard is recorded. Surveys start one-half hour before local sunrise and take about 5 hours to complete. Over 4,100 survey routes are located across the continental U.S. and Canada.

Once analyzed, BBS data provide an index of population abundance that can be used to estimate population trends and relative abundances at various geographic scales. Trend estimates for more than 420 bird species and all raw data are currently available via the BBS web site.

BBS data were instrumental in focusing research and management action on neotropical migrant species in the late 1980s, and on grassland species in the mid-1990s.

State Natural Heritage programs and Breeding Bird Atlas projects often utilize BBS data to enrich their databases. Educators often use BBS data as a tool to teach biological, statistical and GIS concepts. More than 270 scientific publications have relied heavily, if not entirely, on BBS data.

For more information or to explore data visit [www.pwrc.usgs.gov/bbs/](http://www.pwrc.usgs.gov/bbs/).



© ADF&G

BBS volunteer Catherine Pohl counts birds on Chichagof Island.

The day starts early for Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) volunteers. Habitat biologist Catherine Pohl has been counting birds along two routes near Hoonah for about 10 years. While counters “Outside” may contend with traffic and barking dogs, Pohl can conduct the entire survey without encountering another car, and nearby rustling is more likely a brown bear or a Sitka black-tailed deer than a dog.

There are about 70 BBS routes run annually in Alaska by about 60 volunteers. A few Alaska BBS routes were started in 1968. The number of routes and consistency of data collection increased in the early 1990s. There is now enough data that researchers are starting to get population trend estimates.

To get involved, contact your state coordinator. In Alaska this is Steve Matsuoka of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Anchorage at 907-786-3672 or e-mail [steve\\_matsuoka@fws.gov](mailto:steve_matsuoka@fws.gov). For other states, check the listing at <http://www.pwrc.usgs.gov/bbs/>.





© Doug Lloyd

Eurasian Wigeon in Anchorage

The Eurasian Wigeon has a range that includes Eurasia, North and South America, Greenland, Iceland, and North Africa. It is a rare spring migrant to south-coastal Alaska, according to George West's annotated list of Alaska birds (*A Birder's Guide to Alaska*, published by the American Birding Association 2002).

## Share your Images

Is your digital camera almost as close a companion as your binocular?

*Wings Over Alaska* newsletter welcomes digital photo submissions (with captions, explanations, or photography tips if appropriate). We can't pay but will provide photo credits and publish several pictures with each newsletter.

E-mail pictures and information (including how you wish your photo credit to appear and where the photo was taken) to:

[wingsoveralaska@fishgame.state.ak.us](mailto:wingsoveralaska@fishgame.state.ak.us)

For more information, call Karla Hart at 907-465-5157.

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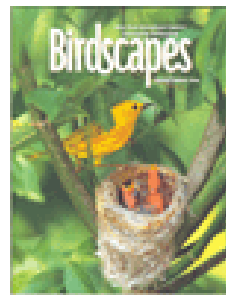
somewhere between 1 in 10,000 and 1 in 100,000 rare birds visiting Nova Scotia are found.

With more than 33,000 miles of coastline, a population of about 650,000, and a vast, lightly populated interior, Maybank estimates that, like in Nova Scotia, 99.9% of all rare birds that visit Alaska pass unnoticed.

So what do you do if you spot a rare bird, a bird that is rare for the area, or a nesting bird that isn't known to nest in Alaska? Follow Maybank's example and take photos. They needn't be of publication quality to substantiate your sighting. And, as soon as possible, share your discovery with local birders (park or refuge staff or Fish and Game offices are good alternatives if you don't know any locals), including specific details on where and when you found the bird. If you're pretty sure you've found something rare in Alaska and don't know who else to call, send details to [wingsoveralaska@fishgame.state.ak.us](mailto:wingsoveralaska@fishgame.state.ak.us) or call 907-465-5157 and we'll try to put you in touch with the right person. Your reports may not only earn your place in birding history, but expand our knowledge of birds.

*How to Document Rare Birds*, by Donna Dittmann and Greg Lasley, provides an excellent tutorial. It was originally printed in the American Birding Association's *Birding*, and is reposted with permission of the author at [http://www.wildlife.alaska.gov/viewing/wings/rare\\_birds.pdf](http://www.wildlife.alaska.gov/viewing/wings/rare_birds.pdf).

## Birdscapes



Are you interested in knowing more about bird habitat conservation?

*Birdscapes: News from International Habitat Conservation*

*Partnerships* profiles conservation projects, species at risk, habitats, research, and "furthermore" three times each year.

Content from this beautiful and informative US Fish and Wildlife Service and Canadian Wildlife Service publication is available online at <http://library.fws.gov/Birdscapes/birdindex.htm>. Free printed subscriptions may be requested by e-mailing [dee\\_butler@fws.gov](mailto:dee_butler@fws.gov).



## Explore Innoko NWR

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service staff photographed this pair of yellow warblers at their nest in the Innoko National Wildlife Refuge. More than 130 species of birds are found in the refuge, including over 300,000 nesting waterfowl and shorebirds. Visitors access Innoko NWR from McGrath in interior Alaska. <http://innoko.fws.gov/>

Explore and download pictures from Innoko, Kodiak, and other refuges nationwide at the Fish and Wildlife Service Image Library at <http://images.fws.gov/>

# Birds of Yukon Charley Rivers National Preserve

The Yukon Charley Rivers National Preserve borders Canada, just south of the Arctic Circle. In 1999-2000, the National Park Service conducted a bird inventory and monitoring program at 1,415 sample stations that resulted in a terrific web resource with a wealth of detailed species accounts (good references wherever you are birding), species density maps, ecological descriptions, and other information. Project co-director Shelli Swanson introduces the ecological context for birds in this region: "The complex geology, climatic conditions, natural fire regime and discontinuous permafrost soils in this 2.5 million acre Preserve has produced a diverse landscape and thus provides habitat for a vast array of bird species. The presence of 163 species (many of them Neotropical migrants) have been documented in the preserve. The Yukon River serves as a natural corridor that funnels birds migrating to and from Alaska during spring and fall migration periods. This natural corridor is also responsible for the occurrence in the Preserve of many vagrant species from more southern and eastern temperate regions." To learn more, go to [http://www.nps.gov/yuch/Expanded/key\\_resources/birds/inventory.htm](http://www.nps.gov/yuch/Expanded/key_resources/birds/inventory.htm)

## Planning for Fall?



Barrow's Goldeneyes © ADF&G/John Hyde

✈ The **8th Annual Sitka Whalefest, November 5-7** isn't about birds but features an outstanding symposium highlighting the latest research on marine mammals. Plan to take the optional boat tours and add a day for birding in this mild coastal climate. A Virginia rail was found there in early December 2003. <http://www.sitkawhalefest.org/>

✈ Combine your Whalefest visit with a stop in Petersburg to view trumpeter swans at **Blind Slough Swan Viewing Area**. Peak season is mid-October through early December. <http://www.fs.fed.us/r10/ro/naturewatch/>

✈ The **Chilkat Bald Eagle Festival in Haines is November 17-24, 2004**. You'll find workshops, field trips, lectures, music, and more in celebration of the incredible gathering of bald eagles on the Chilkat River Bald Eagle Preserve. <http://www.baldeagles.org/schedule.html>



**August 21-28, 2004 Creamer's  
Field Migratory Waterfowl  
Refuge  
7th Annual ~ Fairbanks**

This festival is held at the height of the sandhill crane fall staging, when thousands of cranes gather at Creamer's Refuge and throughout the Tanana Valley to feed and prepare for the long migration ahead, festival activities are centered around this spectacular congregation.

The first weekend features natural history author and artist Paul Johnsgard as keynote speaker and a workshop leader. Johnsgard is author of more than 40 books, including *Crane Music: A Natural History of American Cranes*.

Events include a nature walk, brunch, banding presentation, kids' crane walk and crafts, sketching workshop, crane watch, and a terrific series of lectures. For a full calendar of events visit <http://www.creamersfield.org>

## Birds as an Educational Theme

Birds can be a dynamic educational theme and lifetime interest that bridges all subjects.

Are you interested in geography? Migrating birds connect Alaska with all continents. Routes are defined by major geographic features.

In literature? From classics to contemporary, you'll find birds.

In science? Read any bird guide and you will discover that there is far more we don't know about birds than we do know. From physiology, genetics and migration patterns to diets and reproduction - countless opportunities to make amazing discoveries remain.

In arts? Draw, sculpt, record, or compose from over 9,000 different species, with vastly different shapes, colors, and songs.

In math? Count birds, calculate travel speeds and distances, or do a complex analysis of population trends.

The *Wings Over Alaska Birding Newsletter* is available online at <http://www.birding.alaska.gov>.

To receive an e-mail when new issues are posted (quarterly), send your e-mail with SUBSCRIBE in the subject line to [wingsoveralaska@fishgame.state.ak.us](mailto:wingsoveralaska@fishgame.state.ak.us)


## Birding is for Students




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Alaska Department of Fish and Game Commissioner Kevin Duffy (back center) presented Ptarmigan level Wings Over Alaska awards to some of the 36 Juneau Douglas Highschool science students in John Anderson's classes (front center) who identified more than 50 species of birds this past school year. Many are well on their way to the Gyrfalcon award at 125 species. Congratulations to all!

### A Sampling of Teachers' Resources

 **Alaska Department of Fish and Game.** You'll find links to bird and birding information at <http://www.sf.adfg.state.ak.us/statewide/aquaticed/teacherresource.cfm>. Check back periodically as new resources are being added. *Alaska's Owlmanac*, a guide to Alaska's 10 owl species, and *Alaska's Birds: Their Identification, Biology and Conservation* have been updated and will be available online soon.

 **Wings Over Alaska certificates.** Make earning the 50 species Ptarmigan certificates a class project to culminate a year of bird studies. Contact Karla Hart at 465-5157 or [wingsoveralaska@fishgame.state.ak.us](mailto:wingsoveralaska@fishgame.state.ak.us) for checklists and a classroom application. Participation is free.

 **Alaska Bird Observatory.** The Alaska Bird Observatory's Boreal Forest Songbirds of Alaska Teaching Unit and Activity Book is available free upon registering. Classroom visits and banding station field trips are also available. <http://www.alaskabird.org/>

 **Cornell Lab of Ornithology.** The educator's guide to bird study includes projects, programs, guidance, and national links. <http://www.birds.cornell.edu/schoolyard/>

### Alaska Birding Clubs and Organizations

Do you participate in a local birding club or group that welcomes new members? We'll be publishing a listing of Alaska birding clubs, with meeting and contact information, in the fall issue of the newsletter. To be included, send details by September 1 to [wingsoveralaska@fishgame.state.ak.us](mailto:wingsoveralaska@fishgame.state.ak.us)